

Developing Cultural Competence - A guide for Leaders and Project Managers

Citation: Moses Afful JR., et al. "Developing Cultural Competence - A guide for Leaders and Project Managers". Clareus Scientific Science and Engineering 2.10 (2025): 32-37.

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Received: April 24, 2025

Published: December 02, 2025



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Abstract

Developing cultural competence is essential for project managers and leaders working in increasingly globalized and multicultural environments. Cultural Intelligence (CQ) — defined as the ability to function effectively across diverse cultural contexts — is a critical competency in 21st-century leadership. This multidimensional construct includes metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions, each contributing uniquely to effective cross-cultural interaction, decision-making, negotiation, innovation, and adjustment. Project managers should actively assess and cultivate their CQ through mindfulness and intentional practice, leveraging tools and structured development steps to enhance their cultural responsiveness and leadership effectiveness. Additionally, overcoming barriers such as limited perception, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, and power imbalances is vital to achieving genuine cultural competence, which in turn fosters organizational effectiveness and team cohesion in diverse settings.

Keywords: Multicultural competence; project managers; cross-cultural projects; intercultural sensitivity; cultural intelligence; cultural dimensions; training effectiveness

Cultural Intelligence

Thomas, & Inkson (2017) affirms competencies for the twenty-first century leadership and management includes *Cultural Intelligence*. Cultural intelligence is the capability to deal effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. The crucial decision to make in managing a culturally diverse team is to maximize the benefits of diversity while minimizing the challenges by sharpening one's cultural intelligence.

(Ang et al, 2014) defines cultural intelligence as the capability to adapt effectively to a different environment (eg. multicultural and cross-cultural). The ability of people to function more effectively than others in a multicultural environment is the driving force behind the creation of the concept called Cultural Intelligence (CQ). Earley and Ang in 2003 are credited with conceptualization of cultural intelligence during a time of "extraordinary globalization and interconnectedness (Ang et al, 2011). Cultural intelligence is defined as a person's capability to function effectively in intercultural environments (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008).

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is a model which is motivated by globalization in the workplace. It is a measure of an individual's capability to function and manage culturally diverse settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). CQ is a general set of capabilities that help individuals become more effective across different multicultural situations and therefore is not specific to one particular culture or context (Ang et al, 2011).

Multidimensional Concept of Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence is a multidimensional concept that includes metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions (Earley and Ang, 2003). These dimensions are defined below:

- Metacognitive CQ reflects the processes that individuals use to acquire and understand cultural knowledge.
- Cognitive CQ is general knowledge and knowledge structures about culture.
- Motivational CQ is the magnitude and direction of energy applied toward learning about and functioning in cross-cultural situations.
- Behavioral CQ is the capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures.

Thomas, & Inkson. (2017) notes that cultural intelligence is about developing a repertoire of skilled behaviors and knowing when to use each one. People can learn to be culturally intelligent; certain innate characteristics of individuals, such as openness, extraversion, and agreeableness, support the development of cultural intelligence.

As the Project Manager, use Table 9 to self-assess your cultural intelligence. Assign the number 1 to 3 to each of the dimensions of CQ. 1 indicating not proficient; 2 developing moving toward proficiency and 3 proficient. (I am proficient in (3); I am developing moving to proficiency (2)? Or I have no skills in this (1). The personal column is why you assigned the value to each dimension

Why CQ

In regards to multicultural team effectiveness, research indicates that high metacognitive, cognitive, and behavioral cultural intelligence encourages interpersonal trust in multicultural teams (Gregory, Prifling, & Beck, 2009;). Below are five reasons why a project manager needs to develop cultural intelligence.

1. Cultural intelligence in general is related to enhanced task performance (any allocated task on the project). Metacognitive and behavioral components of cultural intelligence are important when it comes to task performance. (Rose, Ramalu, Uli, & Kumar, 2010).
2. Cultural intelligence enables effective cultural judgments and decisions (Mannor, 2008). A well-developed metacognitive cultural intelligence and cognitive cultural intelligence enhances cultural judgment and decision-making (Mannor, 2008). A project manager who desires to improve their decision-making skills must develop their cultural intelligence.
3. Intercultural negotiation is a staple of multicultural projects. Research shows that culturally intelligent leaders are likely to be cooperative. A project leader has a high cognitive and motivation that increases their effectiveness in a negotiation process that leads to better outcomes for the project (Imai & Gelfand, 2010).
4. Organizational innovation (i.e. collective, the creativity of the organization) is connected to cognitive and behavioral cultural intelligence. Cognitive cultural intelligence empowers people to recognize the similarities and differences between cultures. This capability to recognize and appreciate similarities and differences helps organizational innovations in a culturally sensitive way (Elenkov & Manev, 2009).
5. Cross-cultural adjustment (being comfortable in another culture) is a logical outcome of CQ. Cross-cultural adjustment is the level of psychological comfort and familiarity an individual demonstrates in a new cultural environment (Ang et al, 2014). Motivational and behavioral cultural intelligence are both positively related to cross-cultural adjustment (Dagher, 2010). A project manager that desires to improve their cultural adjustment needs to focus on developing the motivational and behavioral com-

ponents of CQ.

As a project manager, review Table 10 to become familiar with the benefits of each dimension of CQ. It is important to understand how a leader can leverage each dimension to increase the chances of succeeding.

CQ Dimensions	Descriptors	Benefits
Metacognitive CQ	My process and strategy to acquire and understand cultural Knowledge	Cultural judgments and decisions Enhanced task performance
Cognitive CQ	My knowledge about my culture and other culture	Organizational innovation Intercultural negotiation cultural judgments and decisions
Motivational CQ	My effort and energy in wanting to learn and engage other cultures	Cross-cultural adjustment Intercultural negotiation
Behavioral CQ	My acquired skills and capacity to behavior culturally responsive conduct	Cross-cultural adjustment Enhanced task performance

Table 1: The Benefits of CQ.

Developing Your Cultural Intelligence

Thomas and Inkson (2017) asserts the acquisition of cultural intelligence requires mindfulness as practice. Using the work of Thomas, and Inkson (2017) mindfulness for project managers will include the list below:

1. Awareness of our own assumptions, ideas, and emotions.
2. Noticing what is apparent about the other person's assumptions, words, and behavior.
3. Involving all of the senses in perceiving situations.
4. Viewing the situation from several perspectives.
5. Interpreting what is happening in the cultural context .
6. Creating new mental maps of others (from other cultures).
7. Adjusting old categories and creating new and more sophisticated groupings for others.
8. Seeking out fresh information to confirm or disconfirm mental maps.
9. Using empathy.

Team members and team leaders (project managers) must be intentional in the structuring of group processes and the steps to enhance individual and collective cultural intelligence. Project managers must consider the effects of team composition and type, the nature of the group task, and the cultural distances of team members.

Cultivating Your Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence can be developed in psychologically healthy and professionally competent people. Earley, & Mosakowski, (2004) recommends steps that will help develop cultural intelligence as seen in Figure 1.

Step 1

This is the initial and crucial beginning phase with the project manager examining his/her CQ strengths and weaknesses. There are peer-reviewed CQ instruments available to achieve this goal. It is recommended that a project manager should undergo at least more than one of these assessments.



Step 2

The next step is the selection of training that focuses on the established weaknesses. For example, someone lacking cognitive CQ might work on developing his/her knowledge of cross-cultures through enrolling in professional development courses or reading on the subject.

Step 3

The third step is putting into practice what knowledge was acquired through the selected professional development. If motivational CQ is low, a person might be given a series of simple exercises to perform. Mastering simple activities such as greetings or conversations with people of other cultures lay a foundation before moving into more culturally demanding activities like negotiating.

Step 4

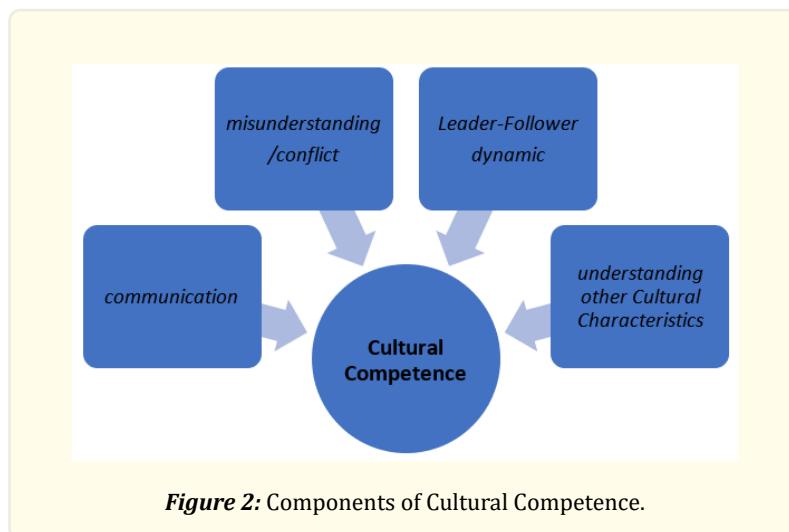
Performing this step indicates that training has been done; the individual organizes their personal resources to support the cultural approaches they have chosen. A realistic assessment of workload and the time available for CQ enhancement is important.

Step 5

The person enters the new cultural setting he/she needs to master. He/she coordinates plans with others, basing the objective on the known CQ strengths and remaining weaknesses. An additional step of reevaluating the newly developed skills and how effective they have been in the new setting, perhaps after collecting 360-degree feedback may be needed.

Cultural Competence

Globalization, technology, migration, and the drive of opportunity have plunged organizations into becoming complex, culturally mixed entities. Board members, senior leaders, middle managers, field employees, knowledge workers, line workers, support people, or entrepreneurs must connect, communicate, collaborate, and compete with others who are culturally unlike themselves (Dolan & Kawamura 2015). Espiridion and Johnson (2011) perceive Cultural competence as overcoming or bridging cultural differences. To be culturally competent means learning and understanding the culture of others. Cultural competence is how well we handle communication, misunderstandings, conflict, leader-follower dynamics, and how we demonstrate our understanding of cultures that differ from our own. Figure 2 shows how communication, misunderstandings, conflict, and leader-follower dynamics influence cultural competence.



Cultural competence is the ability to manage cultural diversity (different cultural characteristics) in a way that contributes to the effectiveness of an organization rather than create misunderstandings and conflict. An essential foundation for cultural competence is respect for and understanding the culture of others. It does mean that to be effective, a project manager has to know how unique cultural characteristics can create cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Richard Bucher (2010), in his book *Diversity Consciousness*, describes six personal and social barriers to overcoming prejudice and discrimination. Overcoming these barriers leads to a better understanding of cultures. Below are the barriers to be identified and overcome to help one become culturally competent:

Limited perception

Having limited knowledge, exposure, and active experience can lead to wrong conclusions. Visiting Los Angles does not give you some knowledge about the whole of the United States. Using your knowledge of Los Angeles to describe other parts of the United States may lead to faulty conclusions, judgment, and decisions based on your limited understanding of the USA. Florida is different and so is Georgia. Expand your knowledge and experience to make an accurate and generalized statement of the USA.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a widespread and deep-seated belief that my culture is better than your culture. The Pew Global Attitude Project (2007) found that more than 70% of the people in 47 countries agreed with the statement, "Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others. Recognize the flaws in your culture and use the strengths in other cultures to enrich yours."

Stereotypes

Stereotyping can be defined as an unproven and oversimplified generalization about an entire group (Bucher 2010). Stereotyping behavior revolves around every dimension of diversity, including job position, job function, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, language, learning styles, and sexual orientation (Bucher 2010). Beware that generalization and oversimplification can lead to poor decision-making. Celebrate nuance labeling, understand and expect exceptions.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a reduced cultural competence because of a rigid pre-judgment made before any encounter or communication occurs. Prejudice is a complete lie. A project manager in a multicultural setting must be open-minded and verify and confirm initial judgments.

Prejudice plus Power

Prejudice plus power leads to the various “isms” at work, with the most volatile being racism. Bucher describes this obstacle to success as institutional racism and the belief that one race is superior to another. Even leaders considered being more enlightened and culturally sensitive than most can succumb to this obstacle to building cultural competence. Use power to enhance equity and representation.

Project managers will not be able to completely remove these barriers, the ability to identify them and minimize the effects on team members will be a plus to team building and team effectiveness. A leader’s cultural competence, therefore, is enhanced by knowing these barriers exist and conscious efforts to manage them will boost a person’s cultural competence.

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